

Is reality TV messing with your head? From teen mom to all things Kardashian, reality TV is seriously popular--especially among teens. But binging on all those drama-filled shows may not be as harmless as it seems

Ilisa Cohen

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"If you look at me, you think I'm, like, stuck-up. But yet, like, I save animals," Snooki whines on the reality TV show *Jersey Shore*. Meanwhile, her pal Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino openly mocks her: "She looks like a spray-painted Chihuahua," he says. Switch the channel and you might find an episode of *Small Town Security* in which Joan, one of the owners of the security firm, laughs so hard at a co-worker farting that she pees on herself-- making her and her co-workers laugh even harder. Then the camera zooms in on her wet pants, for all of America to see.

Insults, temper tantrums, selfishness, gross behavior, and plain old stupidity--these are the main ingredients for most of today's reality TV shows. Guess who's watching them? Millions of young people just like you. According to *Entertainment Weekly*, three of the most popular shows teens watch are *Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, and *Teen Mom*. "Teens love them for the same reasons adults do--they're outrageous and fun to watch," says Sierra Filucci, senior editor of TV and DVD reviews at Common Sense Media, a nonprofit advocacy group for media literacy. But are these shows just mindless entertainment, like so much of the media we consume, or is there a dark side to these views of reality?

Idiotic or Influential?

There seems to be an even greater draw than just the amusement factor of reality television, says cultural critic and family therapist Lori Gottlieb. "Teens are naturally curious about other people's lives and want to know how their own lives compare," she says. And they often look to reality shows for answers. Young people also tend to watch shows with older characters to learn what it will be like when they get to that age, according to David Bickham, Ph.D., staff scientist at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston.

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But does that mean you'll blindly copy whatever irresponsible antics Kim, Kourtney, and company get into? Experts give you more credit than that. "You're not going to go out and get drunk or pregnant just because you see Snooki do it," Bickham says. "The influence is more subtle."

When you see bad behavior on TV 24/7 under the guise of "reality," you might start to believe that these characters aren't exaggerating. Experts fear that a steady diet of watching people behaving badly increases our tolerance for rudeness--or even violence.

The Girl Scout study found that 73 percent of people surveyed thought that reality TV shows "make people think that fighting is a normal part of a romantic relationship," and 70 percent said that reality TV "makes people think it's OK to treat others badly." But the degree of influence these shows have might depend on how you feel about yourself, not just how you feel about the characters you see on TV. "If a teen is struggling with self-esteem issues, he might adopt some of these attention-getting behaviors to get recognition," says Gottlieb. "If, however, you're confident in yourself and have positive sources of attention, such as sports or theater or good friends, you'll probably see the Kardashians or *The Situation* as ridiculous, not role models."

Smoke and Mirrors

Given the impact these shows may be having on our worldview, you can't help but wonder: How realistic are these so-called reality shows? The production process starts the same way it does for most shows and movies--the wannabe stars audition. There are even acting schools devoted to helping "normal" people get on TV. At the New York Reality TV School, founder Robert Galinsky explains ways to impress producers: Be vulnerable, emotional, and not very good at keeping a secret. And even these qualities aren't always enough to make a successful reality star. "There is so much competition for ratings that producers have to up the outrageousness factor to attract viewers," says Filucci. So what you see may not have happened as naturally as you're led to believe. Fights are often scripted, encouraged by producers or created by cast members trying to make themselves stand out from the crowd. "But a smart viewer can spot contrived situations," Filucci points out. "Teens don't want to be manipulated."

Fourteen-year-old Shelby Poole, of Laguna Niguel, California, agrees. "I think the characters' attitudes and behaviors on these shows are all very staged for TV, so I try to pick up on that," she says.

Tuned In

Why I Watch Reality TV With My Kids It's become our era's family viewing

By James Poniewozik

THIRTEEN SUMMERS AGO, WHEN A PAIR of shows called *Survivor* and *Big Brother* debuted on CBS, there were uneasy cries that reality TV was going to coarsen our civilization. Contestants were encouraged to lie and backstab one another! People were eating actual rats! Won't someone think of the children?

You can debate how well, by 2013, reality TV has fulfilled its potential as a hell-bound handbasket. But I do know this: when the regular TV season ended in May and the summer-premiere season started, it was an exciting time at home, because it meant *MasterChef* was coming back, and my wife and I could watch it together with the kids. Pioneer families had the evening taffy pull; we watch people caramelizing sugar on Fox.

Reality TV is a big, diverse medium, of course. Some of it is raunchy, some obnoxious (like the despicable let's-fire-someone fest *Does Someone Have to Go?*, also on Fox), and some very, very good. In other words, it's not unlike scripted TV.

But an unexpected thing has happened over the past generation: reality TV has become the new version, and perhaps the last bastion, of prime-time family viewing.

It's not just *MasterChef* for us: excepting old reruns, nearly every TV series my kids and I watch together is a reality show. We handicap *The Voice* contestants' odds every week. *The Amazing Race* has given us a new perspective on navigating through airports on vacations. *Shark Tank* (on which people pitch for funding for their fledgling companies) captivates the kids and has shown me—one of the least entrepreneurial-minded people I know—what a fascinating process conceiving and valuing a business is. *Chopped*, *Market Warriors*, *Top Chef*—if it involves cooking something or selling something or cooking something to sell it, we'll watch it.

Before you call Child Protective Services on me, let me explain. People sometimes assume that because I'm a TV critic, I'm permissive about what my kids (who

are 8 and 11) watch. It's really the opposite, maybe because I'm professionally exposed to what's out there. And plenty of their classmates' parents have found safe harbor in reality's Kardashian-and-Snooki-free sectors. About a decade ago, the decency-policing Parents Television Council condemned reality shows that "revel in [participants'] eagerness to publicly parade their lack of moral integrity." Today, its recommended-viewing lists include *Cupcake Wars* and *Undercover Boss*.

When people complain that there are fewer good shows than there used to be for families to watch together, it's often assumed this means that TV has become more vulgar or adult. Which is true in some ways, but really the overall trend is that TV has become more *specific*. Everyone has a demographically targeted TV, toddlers and adults alike.

We actually live in a pretty great era for kids' TV, and prime time is rich with sophisticated dramas like *Mad Men* that could exist only at a time of greater creative license. But most adults have limited tolerance for kids' programs (show me the American parent not traumatized by the phrase *Swiper, no swiping!*), and it will be years before I show my kids more than the title sequence for *Game of Thrones*. (Which they love.)

Today's creative explosion in scripted TV has crowded out some all-ages genres that used to exist. A show like Starz's *Da Vinci's Demons*, about the exploits of the young inventor in Renaissance Florence, might have been a clean historical *MacGyver* if it had aired in the '80s or '90s. Because it's on pay cable in 2013, it's full

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of disembowelments, pederastic clergy and couplings more explicit than any Leonardo anatomical sketch.

Enter reality TV. It's no accident that many of the series I've mentioned are competition shows: like sports, it's a genre that can appeal to kid and adult interests without denying either one. Most of these series are made for adults without any particular goal of being all-ages entertainment.

But on their own terms, they reflect things that kids are interested in: competition, creation, performance. Maybe more important, they're also a kind of structured introduction to the grownup world. They gamify aspects of adult life—cooking, traveling, keeping a house, holding a job. *Storage Wars* and *House Hunters* are about pricing and setting value. There's a whole world of reality shows about work, like *Deadliest Catch* and *Gold Rush*, often made accessible with some kind of scorekeeping element.

And while *appropriate* is a subjective term, many of these shows keep it relatively clean. (O.K., *MasterChef*'s season premiere included a cook who prepared roadkill, resulting in about a million "beaver" double entendres, but if they didn't sail over the Jrs.' heads, it's because they've heard worse at school.) In some ways, these shows re-create formats older than today's parents: What is *Duck Dynasty* if not *The Beverly Hillbillies* in camouflage?

As for those old days of TV, I remember them too well to romanticize them: for every *Cosby Show* (whose reruns we still marathon from the DVR), there were plenty of insipid family sitcoms; I'll take *Restaurant: Impossible* over *Small Wonder* any day. As tough as today's media world is to negotiate as a parent, I'm glad my kids are growing up in a time that has created prime-time series like *Breaking Bad* and *Louie*—which they can watch, much later, when they're older.

In the meantime, I'm grateful for reality TV. If it's sending the world to hell, at least we can go there as a family. ■